

**Statement
of
Mark S. Gleeson**

**864 Fairways Drive
Oakmont, PA 15139**

on

HR 23

**Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of
2007**

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

April 18, 2007

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee

My name is Mark Gleeson and I am a member of the American Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II. I joined the American Maritime Service in June 1945 fully expecting to be part of the invasion fleets invading Japan planned for November 1945. Physical injuries in training camp and at sea cut my sea service short. I have my Honorable Discharge from the United States Coast Guard under the provisions of PL 105-368. I appear today speaking in favor of HR 23.

I first applied for my military discharge under the provisions of PL 95-202 in 1989. When this was turned down, I became involved in the efforts of Merchant Marine veterans to gain our denied veterans' recognition through federal legislation. The issue at point was when did World War II end and who qualified for veteran's recognition. For almost ten years I had a title of Vice Chairman of the Merchant Mariners Fairness Committee, the ad hoc committee that worked with many distinguished members of Congress to finally pass legislation in 1998 granting veterans status to about 3000 seamen who had been denied such recognition by the Civilian/Military Service Review Board due to their interpretation PL 95-202. I have written a personal chronicle of this ten-year legislative struggle.

In reflecting on this chronicle that covers five sessions of Congress, it is obvious that the scope of HR 23 can not be a funding problem. It does not fund the varied veterans' benefits, including educational, loan, and medical benefits. It acknowledges the service of merchant seamen only.

To this point, the chronicle contains the fact that after four previous efforts, the Senate and the House in 1996, passed S-281 by voice vote, a bill that established the start of the Vietnam conflict as February 28, 1961, not the August 5, 1964 date following the Tonkin Bay incident. This legislation, spearheaded by Senator D'Amato of New York, belatedly recognized some 16,000 service men who had been serving in Vietnam during that time period. The Congressional Budget Office indicated that this act would have no significant impact on the Veterans' Affairs Budget. These men fully and richly deserved belated government recognition and response for their service, and their service related injuries. We believe the merchant marine veterans of World War II also deserve a positive response for their service. Of some 250,000 seamen at the end of World War II, it is estimated that less than 10,000 are still alive, and there are fewer each year.

We ask for your help in passing HR 23. Only those seamen recognized by a federal court decision in 1987 received limited medical benefits. The remaining **Denied Seamen** recognized by PL 105-368 receive no medical benefits. All they are entitled to is a tombstone and a burial flag. If they want a medal they are entitled to, they must pay for it. They must also pay the Coast Guard \$30 for their Honorable Discharge papers. We believe it is time all eligible World War II Merchant Marine Veterans be treated as equal veterans. While HR 23 does not grant educational or medical benefits to remaining seamen, it does partially compensate them for the benefits they never received. The

federal court and congress have recognized merchant seamen of World War II as veterans. We are proud of that. We are not proud that we are still not treated as veterans. We read in the chronicle that only a few people we contacted in our ten- year legislative effort were knowledgeable about what the merchant marine did to help defeat the enemies of democracy. It was as difficult then as it is now to explain incidents of history and to illustrate that without the men who manned the merchant fleet, final victory would not have been possible. Some understanding of history is important to appreciate the significance of HR 23.

Over the years, we found few people who knew that thousands of young men were actively recruited by the government to join the merchant marine in 1945 so they could man the ships that would invade Japan in November 1945. The two planned invasions of Japan would have resulted in an estimated one million American casualties. Included in these casualties would have been merchant seamen. It is difficult to communicate these issues that are now 62 years old. It is also hard for us to overcome the effect of misinformation that has been repeated over and over and thus, has prevented the passage of HR 23.

Certain issues have come up year after year to support denying merchant seamen the requested relief. Among them are the disparity in the pay scales and the contention that there were strikes by merchant seamen. With respect to the often-mentioned strike, the truth is that the strike resolved around some longshoremen labor issues in the summer of 1946 in New York City. **This was a dock labor management issue, not a merchant seamen issue.** What is important to this discussion is that during World War II, no ship did not sail, or sailed late due to a strike by seamen. Admiral Emory Land, Administrator of the War Shipping Administration, stated this fact in his last report to Congress on January 15, 1946. This fact is never mentioned. Failing to correct the misperception that the merchant seamen went on strike is, at the least, an affront to the men who served and died for their country.

No invasion failed or was delayed as merchant ship crews reportedly took off for coffee hour, or refused to load or unload cargo on the weekends. We have found that few people knew that when a ship was sunk, and the seaman was in the water, his pay ceased the minute he abandoned ship and did not start again until he signed on to a new ship. If he was injured, this could have been weeks or months. If he lost all his clothing, he had to buy new clothing himself, if he survived. He was not provided free gear. Yet, seamen came back out of the cold or burning water, and sailed again. The pay issue that is used again and again against merchant seamen never really existed. Unfortunately these facts are not well known.

The men of the Naval Armed Guard and the merchant seamen sailed together on the same ships, ate the same food, manned the same guns, fought the same enemy, died or were wounded on the same ships. The Naval Armed Guard veterans, men we call our blood brothers, received full veteran's benefits. They deserved this. The surviving World War II merchant seamen are still waiting.

We are here again, discussing things that have been settled before in our favor both in federal court and in federal legislation. We are, however, at a disadvantage in presenting facts to members of Congress regarding HR 23. All the other services have historical research centers staffed by professional historians, all paid by the government, that produce data for you, the public, and as records of their particular service. Congress also has military liaison personnel available who present their version of issues. The merchant marine has no such historical center to present credible testimony on our behalf, or government personnel to speak for us.

HR 23 is a belated yet welcomed attempt to recognize the efforts of men of a service that has its name engraved on the new National World War II Memorial, in the same size as the other services. The merchant marine's name would not be there, carved forever in stone along with other services, if it were not considered a service equal to all others.

Finally, HR 23 could also help in a small way to acknowledge the Merchant Marine of World War II as the only non-segregated service. While most African-Americans in the army and in the other services were relegated to menial tasks, African-Americans in the merchant marine graduated from the United States Maritime Academy at Kings Point. African-American seamen shipped out as masters, officers and crews of ships, serving in harm's way the entire war.

The Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II respectfully asks you to finally recognize them for their participation in the war, as all other services have been previously recognized by their government for their wartime service. We ask you to pass HR 23. We believe it is the right thing to do, and we believe this is the right time to do it. America will respect that.

Thank you